

IN THE RIVER

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The old proverb to the contrary, it *is* possible to go home again—but, as the suspenseful tale that follows suggests, if your voyage away from home has been transformative enough, you might have difficulty recognizing it when you get *back ...*

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JENNA REE screamed as she was dragged into the cold air, a keening, inhuman wail as the oxygenated water poured out of her lungs. She lashed out with her arms and legs but the strange, pale creatures holding her were too strong. They strapped her to a hard board then carried her away from the rectangular hatch that led back to the warmth and safety of the ship beneath the airlock. Panic struck as the last of the water drained out her throat.

“Don’t fight it. Take long, deep breaths, Dr. Ree,” one of the creatures said. Another, its face framed in brown hair, pushed the first creature aside.

“Jenna? It’s me, Val. You have to breathe.”

“She can’t understand you,” the first creature said. “Now step back, Dr. Yastrenko. Please. Let us work.”

The harsh, clipped sounds meant nothing to her. Only the roaring in her ears seemed real. She tried to beg, but her olfactor no longer functioned. The stark, white light drew to a pinpoint, the edge of her vision a dark ring.

“Valium, now! Get the resuscitator ready.”

Something bit her on the throat, but Jenna was beyond caring. She had the vague sensation of her jaws being pried apart and something cold and metallic pushed down her throat. 'Let me go home to die,' she thought as the light faded. 'Why won't they let me go home?'

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She swam again in the River, the light soft and blue. Outside the moss covered walls, beyond the scattered viewports, stars burned bright, always moving as the world revolved around its axis. She knew in abstraction the River was a construct, a machine grown to travel the void, an endless stream that flowed from star to star, but the distances seemed impossible. None here had seen Old Home. None would live long enough to see it again. Jenna felt a wave of sorrow pass over her tongue, the flavor of copper and bitter fish.

Far below, where the water thickened with krill and fresh salts, the family drifted with languid abandon around a heat vent. Jenna tried to dive down, but couldn't move. One of the people noticed her and broke away. She knew Finder by the mottled patch of green behind her long skull. Slowly, her elegant tentacles fluttering in the rhythm of sadness, the great creature rose into the cooler water above.

"Sister," Jenna breathed in the language of respect. "I think I am ill. I can no longer swim down to meet you."

"Strange Sister..." Finder graced her with a clutching arm, a simple brush across her face. Jenna tasted regret, but also joy in the ancient pilot's words. "It is time for you to go home."

"But, I am home."

"No, small one. You must go to your birth home now, above the water."

"There is only death above the water." Jenna repeated the old children's adage she had learned as a hatchling. Or had she? Her thoughts were mottled, a confused, tainted patchwork. Again, Finder brushed her cheek.

"Good-bye, Strange Sister. May your waters be rich."

"No!" Jenna tried to follow the massive creature down, but couldn't. Already, the sweet water grew thin. Cold, she shivered. Nearby, a faint

rustling caught her attention and she forced her eyes open. The light was painfully sharp, but from the corner of her vision she saw movement. The creature with the bearded face approached and loomed over her, a length of beige cloth in his hand. He lay the blanket over her chest and smoothed it around her body.

“Welcome back, sleepy head. You don’t know how glad I am to see you.”

To Jenna’s surprise, she understood the man, though the words made little sense. Hesitantly, she tasted the air. A faint chemical trace drifted on it.

“Who are you?” she croaked.

“My name,” he said slowly, “is Valeri Yastrenko. I’m your husband.”

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Her life fell into a new routine. Gone were the lazy mornings, replaced by painful, frustrating bouts of physical therapy. Jenna hated the exercises and the patronizing tone the therapists used, as if she was a damaged hatchling better left to the mercy of a swift death. But none of the indignities she faced in those sessions compared to the hellish hours that waited after the midday break.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Ree,” said a gaunt woman with pale, lifeless hair. It made her look sickly, as if the flesh was ready to slip from her bones. “How are we today?”

“Why do you call me ‘doctor’?” Jenna asked. It was becoming easier to form the clipped words. “Am I a healer?”

“No. You are a teacher.”

“What do I teach?”

The pale woman smiled. Frustrated, Jenna repeated the question.

“What do I teach, Dr. Emily Markser?”

“Ah, you remembered my name today. Excellent.” She patted Jenna’s hand. “You are a professor of Abstract Mathematics. You volunteered for the Deep

Immersion program because you felt you might be able to unlock the Tedris numbering system.”

“You say the River People’s name wrong.” Jenna felt a sense of superiority over the pale woman. Even without her olfactor, she suspected she could make herself understood were she to return to the River. Markser and the others, she knew, never could. “Say it more slowly. *Theid triss.*”

“Thed trezz,” Markser said, annoyed at the interruption. “Were you able to understand the Thed trezz numbering system?”

“Valeri Yastrenko...” Jenna fumbled over the difficult phrase. “He says it is important that I remember how the Theid count.”

“Yes. Very important.” A bell chimed and Markser rose and crossed the small chamber. Despite the low gravity, the woman swam like a wounded eel. She returned a moment later, a sealed mug in hand. Jenna caught a whiff of the bittersweet hot liquid within. Tea, she remembered. Dr. Markser took a hesitant sip. “Until we understand their mathematics, we have no way to unravel their technology. That’s why we came out here, to the edge of the solar system. We need to learn how they harvest zero-point energy.”

Jenna frowned. Vaguely, she recalled the term and struggled to put it into context. “They call it the Unseen Flow.”

Markser froze, her mug halfway to her lips. “You learned how they harness ZPG?”

“Yes.” Jenna tried to frame her thoughts, but without her olfactor, without the thousand subtle expressions of taste and smell, she could not describe what she instinctively knew. She tried again, but failed. Cold sweat broke out on her face, and she felt herself become ill. The room seemed to draw in, the light flickering in nauseating pulses. She grabbed the table edge as the spinning sensation worsened. Shaking, unable to control her limbs, her eyes rolled up in their sockets. The light browned as she fell away from the confining chair. As darkness swept over her, she heard Markser yelling.

“Damn it. She’s having another seizure.”

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“Why have you abandoned me?” Jenna cast her plea into the depths, but her

words swirled away untasted. Farther below, lit from beneath by the warming vents, the family rested. A few lifted their long faces and sniffed the water, as if perhaps they caught a trace of her, but made no move to rise. Tears ran down Jenna's face and vanished in the eddies. At long last, Finder broke away from the pod and swam in long spirals upward. One of her tentacles dabbed at the wetness beneath Jenna's eyes, and carried the tear down to her broad, lipless mouth.

"Go home, Strange Sister," she said softly. "Go home."

* * * *

"Jenna?"

She forced her eyes open despite the throbbing in her skull. The lights in the little room were too bright, pinpoints surrounded by rainbow clouds. Valeri Yastrenko brushed a loose strand of hair away from her eyes.

"You have to stop scaring me like this," he said. "I am getting too old for these roller coasters of yours."

She understood less than half of what he said, but gathered enough from his tone to fill in the blanks. More and more she realized the key to this flat, often meaningless jargon depended on the listener as much as the speaker. She tried to imitate his smile, but the contortions made her headache worse.

"I was ill?"

"Ill?" Yastrenko gave his shaggy head a quick shake. "You died for almost a minute and a half. They had to use the defib on you."

"I was back in the River. I did not want to leave. I want to go back to my family." She stared into his deep, gray eyes, then added, "Please."

He looked away, an expression on his face she could not understand. After a moment, he let out a long, slow breath. "Jenna, do you remember what they did to you? The surgeons, I mean, before you went to the Theid triss?" He stumbled over the word, as if perhaps the flavor of it burned his lips. "They implanted a packet of alien nerve tissue in your limbic system, and another in your corpus callosum. It was these strands of tissue that allowed you to interface."

Absently, Jenna freed her arm from beneath the confining blanket and let her fingers roam along her temples. A tiny scar rested above her left ear, the hair around it bristled and short. "The olfactor?"

"Yes." Gently, he pulled her hand away from the scar. "The olfactory node was attached to the interface points. It let you live among them. Let you communicate, maybe even think like they did. But, it is also the reason we had to take you out of the program earlier than expected. The alien tissue is breaking down and is affecting your brain. Dr. Markser and I agree we must remove the tissue before the damage becomes permanent."

With a clarity Jenna had not experienced since being cast out of the River she recoiled, shocked at what the man suggested.

"If you do that," she forced the word out, "I will never be able to return."

"No. You won't." Yastrenko tried to touch her cheeks, but she batted his hand away. To her surprise, she saw tears form at the corner of his eyes. "Jenna, I don't want to lose you again. I want the old you to come back."

"I don't believe," Jenna said, void of any emotion, "she exists anymore."

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She was alone.

Among the family she had never sensed this absence of contact. Even when separated, the currents carried their trace. Distance became irrelevant, every thought uttered a part of the common whole. Not until she had been severed from the endless thread that was the River did she truly understand what she had lost. Even her senses seemed diminished, the richness of existence depleted in this dry, sterile world. Slowly, fighting the vertigo, Jenna removed the straps around herself.

The room was mercifully empty. Jenna drifted weightless toward what at first appeared to be a portal into an adjoining chamber. Instead, she was disappointed to discover it only a reflection. She touched the mirror and frowned.

“Who are you?” Her fingers traced the outline of her face. Among the Theid, appearance meant little. One simply was. Here, everyone not only claimed to be different, but seemed to revel in it. Suddenly, she felt a tearing need to see the stars. Jenna pulled the sliding door aside and floated into the corridor beyond.

Padded walls formed tunnels, branching corridors that cut stark angles seemingly at random. A slight pull told Jenna which way out was, the ship’s spin providing a mild gravity. Without current to carry her, Jenna dragged herself along the handrails as she wandered outward.

Her chest began to ache, her breathing irregular and quick as she increased her pace. Once, she passed several humans but said nothing, ignoring their startled expressions as she hurried past. Ahead, yet another corridor waited. Jenna reached the junction but couldn’t decide which path to take. Her temples pounded, and exhausted, she closed her eyes.

“Why have you abandoned me?” She whispered, but knew there would be no reply. Already, the old dreams faded, the River’s constant, swirling touch little more than the memory of a memory. Other memories intruded, odd glimpses of another life, a life she had carefully buried. Her hands shook violently as she curled into a tight ball, arms wrapped around her knees. The shaking in her limbs worsened, and she bit down on her lip, hoping the pain might hold back the flood of memories.

“No, no, no...” Jenna fought to stem the flood but couldn’t. Her old life blossomed around her, disjointed flashes, bits and pieces of who she was before the surgeons had done their work. She sobbed, hard, wracking convulsions that tore the breath from her lungs. “No! Please, no!”

Darkness stole over her. Disoriented, she vomited. Sour bile burned her nose and throat as the contents of her stomach gushed out. From nowhere, hands closed around her shoulders. She tried to break free but no longer had the strength. From far off, as if she listened from the bottom of an empty shaft, she heard voices.

“Get her prepped for surgery,” the voices said. “Those implants are coming out now.”

* * * *

Emptiness claimed her, a wash of dull pain that refused to leave. Jenna tried

to move, but her head and shoulders were bound by hard points that dug uncomfortably into her flesh.

“Don’t try to sit up.” The voice was masculine and thickly accented. Jenna forced her eyes open. The light was dim, the temperature in the room cool and dry. A man stood over her, concern plain in his deep-set eyes. Despite the pain, Jenna smiled.

“Hello, Val.”

“Hello, Jen.” The man’s bearded face split in a pleasant, relieved grin. She hadn’t noticed how thick his accent was, or how wonderful his homely features could seem. He held a water bottle to her lips and let her take a short sip from the rigid straw. “Don’t struggle, okay? They have you in full restraints until the anesthesia wears off.”

“So I gathered.” She closed her eyes and let her face go slack. It helped with the throbbing pain in her temples. “The implants are gone?”

“Yes.”

“All of them?”

“The surgeons are confident they removed all the alien tissue. If you can trust a machine.”

Jenna chuckled at the remark. For a scientist, Valeri Yastrenko was almost pathologically suspicious of robotic medicine. In so many ways he was an old-fashioned man, Earth-bound and proud of it. Part of his charm. Part of the reason she had fallen in love with him.

“I am so glad to have you back.” His hand slipped into hers, his fingers so thick they forced hers apart. “How do you feel?”

“Drained,” she said. “Empty. You can’t imagine what it’s like to be connected to them.” She hesitated. Despite the worsening pain, but she had to know the answer to the question plaguing her. “Was I able to break their math?”

A long silence filled the room, broken only by the soft, liquid sound of the machinery tending her. She opened her eyes and focused on Yastrenko’s face. “What happened?”

“Can we talk about this later?”

“No. Now.”

“Jenna,” Yastrenko sighed. “You stopped transmitting months ago. If you discovered how to translate their mathematics, you never bothered to tell us.”

He bent down and kissed her forehead, the scent of his beard so like an old dog she had loved as a child. More memories rolled over her, a cascade effect as if the human side of her personality was punishing her for having been suppressed. She tried desperately to think about her time with the aliens, but nothing remained, as if a wall had been erected. A warm, sticky sensation crept through her limbs, no doubt a sedative released in response to her rising frustration. Unable to stay awake, she let herself be carried once more into watery dreams.

When she woke again, the restraints were gone, nothing holding her but blankets and a sleep net. Nearby, someone snored. Jenna risked turning her head. In the corner of the small room, Yastrenko floated like an overgrown infant wrapped in a blanket. She smiled at the thought, but quickly her mood dissolved, her last thoughts swarming out of the drug-induced haze. Her time among the Theid triss had been wasted. She felt as if she existed in two planes simultaneously, entangled particles which could never exist in the same place simultaneously. With a cold certainty, she knew she was losing her memories of the River.

She wondered if the strange, drifting creatures would remember her.

* * * *

New routines filled Jenna’s hours, the day broken into periods of therapy and rest. She went through the motions without enthusiasm. No matter how hard she pretended otherwise, the lost months preyed on her and more and more, she found herself drawn to the tiny observation lounge on the underside of the ship.

She still needed to see the stars.

The air in the narrow chamber was cool, the long window rimmed with creeping tendrils of frost, spent breath and escaped moisture transmuted into ethereal, ever-shifting patterns. Jenna’s fingers traced the crystalline

etchings with a fingernail. Something in the juxtaposition of ice against the unblinking stars called to her, as if the key she sought lay in front of her waiting only to be noticed. Her reflection in the thick glass mocked her, as if a second Jenna Ree floated on the other side of the window.

“Lights, off,” she said softly. The room dimmed until nothing remained but a soft blue line marking the exit. Now the stars seemed brilliant, bright gems spilled on an oily pool. From this vantage, far beyond Pluto’s orbit, the sun was simply one of billions. It had taken fifteen years from the moment the Theid triss ship had first popped into existence on the edge of the solar system, its beacon a mournful, unchanging wail, for humanity to mount this expedition. Jenna’s life had been consumed by the enigmatic message, swallowed up in the attempt to establish contact. So much had passed during the decade and a half. Her courtship with Valeri. The partial decoding of the Theid triss language. The decision to build this ship and the long, four years’ climb to reach the enormous alien vessel. Jenna craned her neck until she could see what lay beneath their own hull. A vague, cylindrical shadow blocked the Southern Cross, the water filled starship more than six kilometers in length. Compared to it, their own ship was like a barnacle on a whale’s flank.

“Why did you bring us out here?” she whispered.

A faint, octagonal glow, one of the thousands of windows that dotted the alien craft, caught her eye. For a moment, she thought she saw something drift past, the elongated skull and sleek tendrils a vague phantom through the viewport. The Theid triss were so different. How could she even contemplate understanding them? Jenna leaned her forehead against the cold glass, desperate to see more, but the shape had moved on, ever in motion.

Motion.

Stars swirling. Frost crystals on glass, melting and reforming, nothing constant. Jenna felt herself tilting and pressed her arm against the ceiling to quell the vertigo as the avalanche of information struck, the wall breached. It was so simple. Overwhelmed, she pushed away from the dark window and hurried back into the bright corridors. Her mind buzzed with the new understanding, so much raw information she feared it might slip away if she didn’t tell someone. She found Yastrenko outside the infirmary and let herself crash into his arms.

“Val,” she said triumphantly. “I’ve found the key.”

“The key?” He frowned, then, nodded, a brief smile creasing the lines around his eyes. “That is good, Jenna. Very good.”

“You don’t seem very excited.” Jenna pushed away, deflated by his lack of response. “Don’t you get it? I’ve finally found a way to reconcile our mathematic system with theirs. I’ve broken the code.”

“Good.” He kissed her, but his heart didn’t seem in it. “I’m glad.”

“What the hell is wrong with you? I thought you’d be thrilled? Don’t you see, now we can finally get to work understanding their technology.”

“Yes...” Yastrenko opened his mouth to say more, but fell silent. Gently, his big hands firm on her shoulders, he pushed her to arms’ length until he could look her directly in the eyes. “Jenna, the Theid triss sent a communication a little over two hours ago. They want us to uncouple and move out to a safe distance. They intend to depart within the next three days.”

“No.” Jenna stared at him, unbelieving. “You can’t let them leave. Not now. For God’s sake, Val, we have to do something.”

“I know.” His voice fell until she thought he might burst into tears. “That’s why Emily is having an olfactor node implanted.”

“Markser?” Jenna’s stomach twisted at the thought of the pale, humorless psychologist taking her place as liaison to the River. “You can’t be serious? If anyone should go below, it should be me.”

Yastrenko stared at her, his eyes unblinking. For one horrible moment, Jenna had the impression that he wished it was her and not Markser about to undergo the dangerous surgery. She recoiled, all too aware that something else lurked in his eyes, a glimpse of betrayal. Guilt. Shame. An acknowledgment. Jenna stared at him, too stunned to speak as what was left of her once-stable universe crashed with fractallike speed into nothingness. She felt a fool for not having seen it earlier. While she was lost in the strange world of the Theid triss, her husband had fallen in love with another woman.

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Gravity increased, an off-tangent drag that piled loose objects against the rear corner of her tiny cabin as the Theid triss ship gradually boosted its spin rate. Chilled, Jenna wrapped a blanket around her shoulders as she sat at

her work station, numbed by the day's events. She desperately wanted to blink and find the affair had been an illusion, another byproduct of her immersion. She had known Emily Markser for years but had never thought of her as a rival. The woman seemed sterile, practically sexless, a pale caricature of cold, Ivy League detachment. How could someone as primal and vibrant as Valeri Yastrenko be attracted to her? Jenna pulled the blanket tighter. What had she done to drive her husband away?

"Stop it," she whispered, scolding herself. "I will not take the blame for this." She welcomed the anger. Nearby, something cracked, like the sound of wood breaking. Jenna stared down at her hand, surprised to see the thin plastic stylus wound between her fingers snapped cleanly in half.

She let the broken pieces fall with lazy ease toward the back corner of the room and stared at the scratch pad flickering quietly on her desk. Lines of hand-scratched symbols and equations glowed on the little screen, some familiar, some crude approximations of Theid taste-scent-touch charts. She hadn't even realized she was doodling until she recognized her own sweeping, almost sloppy handwriting. Though she still had no proofs, Jenna knew the long chains of numbers would balance. She sighed. "Maybe the bastard should have cheated on me months ago. Then we could have all gone home."

Behind her, someone coughed. Jenna turned slowly and saw Yastrenko waiting outside in the corridor, his hand on the doorsill.

"I just came to gather up my things," he said.

She nodded, but said nothing. Yastrenko slipped past her, found a duffle bag and quickly began stuffing clothing and personal items inside it. Jenna sat at her desk and watched him. Yastrenko pulled a final pair of socks from his locker then drew the string tight around the mesh bag.

"Jenna, I'm sorry," he began, but she cut him off.

"Don't. I don't want your apologies or your damned excuses. Maybe someday, but not right now."

He looked away, unable to meet her eyes. Duffle bag in hand, Yastrenko turned to leave, but stopped as he noticed the numbers on her scratchpad. "These are your theorems?"

Jenna nodded.

“It almost looks like you are describing harmonic vibrations.”

“I am.” Despite her anger, she couldn’t shut out the sense of discovery. “Like everything about the Theid, nothing is absolute. It’s no wonder we couldn’t understand what they were trying to tell us. We wanted hard numbers. They don’t even understand the concept. As a matter of fact, they only have two numbers in their lexicon.”

“But, that is impossible.” Yastrenko frowned. Jenna pulled the pad around, secretly enjoying his confusion as she traced the jumbled string of glyphs.

“To our way of thinking, yes. But not to theirs. To them, the entire universe is an unending string. For the Theid triss, there are only two numbers, one and not-one. Add one and one together and you don’t get two. You get a greater one.”

“A greater one?” He sounded doubtful, but leaned closer and studied the equations. “And that lets them manipulate space-time?”

“Apparently.” Jenna shrugged. “I’m not a physicist.”

Yastrenko stood, eyes locked on the pad and shook his head in wonder. “It’s going to take years for us to reconcile this.” He straightened, and suddenly the excitement in his eyes faded, replaced by guilt. “Jenna, I do love you.”

“Strange way you have of showing it.”

He gathered up his duffle and started once more into the corridor, but turned before he left the cramped chamber.

“I meant to tell you. The flight crew would like you to be in the cockpit when Emily goes below.” His voice cracked around her name. “They need you to monitor her transmissions.”

“I’ll be there,” she said, her tone flat. She waited until he was gone, then lay down on her bed and cried herself to sleep.

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The cockpit reminded Jenna more of the trading floor of a stock brokerage than the control room of a spacecraft. She sat at the small workstation one of the environmental engineers had escorted her to and tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible. To keep busy, she ran a third diagnostic check of the equipment linking Markser to the ship. Fast numbers scrolled across the screen, followed by "All systems are operating properly." Satisfied, she leaned back in the padded chair and waited. Across the circular chamber a young man with a thick red beard raised his voice.

"Captain, the Theid triss just sent a message."

Jenna winced at his horrible mispronunciation. A slender woman with short gray hair hurried across the room and joined him.

"What did they say?" Paula Spolar, the First Shift Pilot asked. Everyone in the control room listened intently as the bearded man read the translation.

"Caution given. Uncouple soon. We choose to leave in next day-cycle."

Jenna frowned. As much as she hated drawing attention to herself, she pulled her way towards the comms desk. "Did they use the Imperative or the Pending tense?" she asked.

"I'm not sure." The man stammered helplessly. "How do you tell the difference?"

"Sorry. I forget most people haven't spent six months living with the Theid triss." Jenna smiled to put him at ease. "Could I have the audio?"

"Sure." The technician leaned back to let Jenna see his work screen. A series of multi-hued spikes danced on the monitor as a low, mournful series of notes washed around them. Jenna shut her eyes and listened. A faint trill at the end of the final stem-verb told her what she needed to know. Even without an olfactor, the message was plain.

"Well?" Captain Spolar stared at her, waiting.

"They're going under thrust," Jenna said. "Probably within the next six hours. They want us to get clear before they engage their drivers."

"We can't let them go," the com-tech said, his frustration plain. "We've barely figured out how to talk to them."

“I don’t think we have any choice in the matter,” Jenna said quietly. She looked up at the captain. “The Theid triss take a long time to reach a consensus, but once they do, it’s all but impossible to change their minds.”

Spolar scratched her long, thin nose as she weighed their limited options. After a moment, she pressed the sense pad on the underside of her left wrist. “Airlock? Proceed with immersion.” She seemed to be speaking with ghosts as the transducers in her jaw relayed the message. “Send Dr. Markser below, but tell her if she hasn’t convinced the aliens to abort within three hours she is to leave without question.” To Jenna she added, “You better get to your station. Markser will be going below any minute now.”

“All right.” Jenna made her way back to her chair and eased into it. The link was still functioning, though Markser’s bio-stats had risen dramatically. As much as she hated it, Jenna found herself sympathizing with Emily Markser. Memories of her own immersion came back, the stark, drowning sensation as the liquid filled her lungs, the sensory overload as the olfactor began gathering and emitting information. Jenna watched the monitor carefully. She had been given the luxury of months to train for her time with the Theid and it had still taken days before she adjusted to the aquatic environment. To expect Markser to do it in a matter of hours bordered on folly.

Without prelude, the bio-stats flared. Across the cockpit, the bearded technician called out, “She’s in.”

Quickly, Jenna split her screen. A watery blue glow filled the left side of the monitor, the video feed sharp. She watched Markser drift downward, feet first, tiny bubbles trailing in her wake. Three long, enormous shapes rose up from the depths to greet her. The nearest of the Theid triss wrapped long tentacles around Markser’s legs. Immediately, the others joined the tangled dance. Jenna watched the other half of the screen as Markser’s pulse raced, the adrenalin levels dangerously high.

“Stop fighting it,” she whispered, as if the woman on the screen could hear her warning. The mainscreen at the front of the room lit up with the same view. A writhing jumble of tentacles all but hid Markser’s desperate flailing as the Theid drew her deeper into the River.

“They’re attacking her,” someone shouted.

“No.” Jenna raised her own voice. “It’s a welcoming ritual.”

She glanced again at Markser's stats. To her dismay, the woman's condition had worsened dramatically. Suddenly, the spiked graphs began to fall. Jenna spun her chair around.

"Captain," she said. "Markser's passed out."

With alarming speed, the image on the screen diminished as Markser continued to sink. The Theid triss cradled her as she drifted downward.

"Get her out of there," Spolar said over her link. "Send in the divers."

"Captain," Jenna stood up. "The Theid might see that as a threat. Right now, they consider Dr. Markser a guest. If we try to take her out by force they may very well defend her."

"I'll risk it," Spolar said. "We need to get her out of there before the aliens go under power. Send in the divers."

Two figures appeared on the screen, sleek black shapes in wetsuits, their faces obscured by diving masks. Although the oxygenated fluid in the River was breathable, the emergency crews had opted for traditional diving gear. Moving in formation, the pair swam rapidly toward the core. Jenna held her breath, waiting, watching.

With blinding speed, two of the Theid twisted around and lashed out at the divers. A gasp ran around the control room as on screen they watched the two humans beaten back. Bits of hoses and torn neoprene drifted in a cloud, along with thin traces of blood. Within seconds, the divers retreated, their naked bodies covered in welts. The Theid triss returned to Markser and escorted her out of camera range. A hard lump tightened in Jenna's stomach. She took a deep breath, then approached Spolar.

"Tell the airlock I'm on my way."

"What are you going to do?" Spolar asked.

"I'm going under." Jenna tried not to let her fear show through. "After that, it depends on the Theid."

* * * *

By the time she reached the airlock the divers had already been taken to the infirmary. A smeared set of bloodied footprints led away from the sealed floor hatch. It was hot within the chamber but Jenna shivered. The closer she came to the hatchway, the stronger her fears grew. A single technician, the same young woman who had operated the airlock on her own immersion months ago, waited beside the control console.

“Hello doctor,” the girl said. “Captain Spolar needs you to call in.”

“Thanks.” Jenna thumbed the intercom. Spolar’s face, distorted by the fish-eye lens, flashed on-screen.

“Dr. Ree, FYI, the aliens have broken contact. I don’t know if this is a technical problem or a deliberate response to what happened. Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

Jenna hesitated. The last thing, she realized, that she wanted was to return to the alien vessel. Before, armed with the symbiotic implants and the olfactor, she had been able to speak to the Theid in their own drifting, dreamlike language. She had become one of them, so much so that she had nearly lost herself. But now, lacking the enhancements, she had no idea if she could even make herself understood. Worse, she feared she might slip back into the Theid patterns, her sanity sacrificed. She wanted to turn and run, but instead faced the tiny lens.

“If I don’t go, who will?”

She began undressing, letting her uniform and shoes drift to the far wall. The gravity had increased noticeably, the spin rate faster as the Theid triss prepped for launch. Behind her, she heard the door leading into the corridor sigh open.

“What in the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Yastrenko stood in the doorway, his eyes red. He stepped toward her, but she drew back and crossed her arms over her breasts. Although Yastrenko had seen her naked hundreds of times, suddenly, standing in front of him in her underwear made her skin crawl.

“Markser’s unconscious. I don’t know if she fainted or if she’s having seizures. Either way, she needs to get out before the Theid triss go under power.”

“So, you play the hero, eh?” Yastrenko’s heavy cheeks darkened. “Is this your way of getting back at me?”

“What?” Jenna gaped at her husband. “This has nothing to do with you. For that matter, it has nothing to do with Markser.”

“Really?” Yastrenko snorted. “Then let the rescue teams go after her. Why do you have to throw this in everyone’s face, the wounded heroine off to save her rival.”

“I don’t have time for this.” Angry now, her earlier fear shunted aside, Jenna pulled her bra over her head, then slipped off her panties. To the tech, she said, “Open the lock.”

Yastrenko glared at her as the outer door hissed shut. Jenna ignored him, concentrating instead on what she had to do as the air pressure in the little chamber rose. She pinched her nose and blew until her ears popped, then stepped to the hatch in the floor and took hold of the railing above it. Slowly, it slid aside. Water jiggled in the hatch as if a membrane was stretched taut across it.

“Jenna,” Yastrenko said, pleading now. “Don’t do this. I don’t want to lose you again.”

She met his eyes, but said nothing. Before she could change her mind, she grasped the rail, stepped into the water and pushed herself down.

The River was warm and thick as amniotic fluid, a comforting envelope. She let herself drift, the hunger for air growing in her lungs until she couldn’t stand it any longer. Fighting her instincts, Jenna inhaled. Liquid poured down her throat, filled her airways, bubbled in her nose. She had forgotten how uncomfortable the transition was. Deliberately, she forced the fluid out, then took another breath. The emptiness in her chest abated as oxygen once more entered her bloodstream. She burped as the gas in her stomach gushed out, leaving a foul taste in her mouth, then drew another breath and swirled the syrupy water over her tongue. Old, half-forgotten flavors teased her. Salt. Copper. A hint of citrus and vinegar. Honey, urine, and rust. Every thought the Theid triss uttered drifted around her, a mélange of swirling images. She tried to make sense of it, but couldn’t. Without the olfactor to translate the faint chemical traces she was deaf. Still drifting, Jenna looked downward toward the softly glowing core.

Far below, a pair of dark shapes rose to meet her. Jenna froze. Every instinct said flee, and it took real effort not to kick back toward the airlock, already little more than a small white square above her. The Theid triss were peaceful by nature but tended to lash out if provoked. It was vital, she knew, to remain calm. She sculled with her fingertips to remain upright in the strong current as the pair of Theid, young hermaphrodites not yet grown to sexual maturity, arrived. She struggled to remember their names but couldn't.

The nearer of the Theid brushed a tentacle across her face, its skin slick and cool. The long, leathery arm withdrew. The pair of sentries studied her, their black, multifaceted eyes less than a meter from her own. One of them opened its broad mouth and sang a short, undulating trill. The overpowering taste of something that reminded Jenna of anchovies filled her mouth.

"I'm sorry," Jenna responded in the simple graphic forms the Theid triss used for radio communication. "I can't understand you."

The Theid repeated the phrase, then slowly backed away. Hesitantly, Jenna raised her right arm. When the sentries made no move, she experimented further and raised both arms over her head. Again, the pair did nothing. Jenna took it as a sign that she had passed their test.

"Thank you," she said, her own voice nearly unrecognizable to her. Slowly, she bent at the waist and flipped, ready to swim down and find where they had taken Markser.

A sharp pain bit her heel. Jenna gasped and rolled over. A brown cloud floated around her left foot. The tentacle that had delivered the lash followed her, ready to strike again. The warning was plain. She was not to descend.

"Please. I need to retrieve my friend." Jenna ignored the irony of the phrase. "She is ill. I have to take her home." She pointed at the bluish glow around the heat vent. Her movements more deliberate than before, Jenna twisted again until she faced head down and started to swim.

The water around her exploded. She gasped as lash after lash cut her skin, the tentacles that had earlier kissed her face now a flurry of whips. Unable to escape the onslaught, Jenna curled into a tight ball, wincing as the

sentries flailed her unprotected skin. A new scent filled the water around her, her own blood. She felt herself tumbling, carried into the deeper, thicker waters by the River's flow.

"Please, stop!" she shouted, but couldn't remember if she was speaking Theid or English. It didn't matter. The sentries seemed unable, or unwilling, to listen. A strange detachment uncoiled in her as she realized she was about to die.

"Stop."

The word rumbled around her, a great, gushing hiss followed by a burst of acetic acid so strong it burnt the cuts that covered Jenna's back and legs. Abruptly, the storm of tentacles ended. Jenna felt a swirl of cool water around her as the sentries fluttered away. Stunned, she opened her eyes. A third Theid triss, a female fully twice the size of the young sentries, floated level with her, the creatures' dark eyes unreadable. Despite her pain, Jenna smiled.

"Finder?"

The old Theid's probing arms reached toward Jenna and gently ran along her back. She seemed concerned at the welts and blood. Speaking slowly, as if to a hatchling, Finder drew closer to Jenna.

"Strange Sister," she rumbled. "Why have you come back?"

"My friend is ill," Jenna repeated, hoping she used the correct inflections. "Please. May I see her?"

Finder said nothing. Jenna's heart sank. Without the surgical enhancements, she realized, her words were little more than babble to the people she had once lived among. She drew a deep breath of the thick, salty water, but before she could say anything else, Finder opened her gill slits and released a bitter jet of yellowish fluid. Far below, more Theid triss picked up the scent, the command clear, and as one rose upward and stopped respectfully beneath Finder. Jenna stared in amazement as she saw Markser cradled in a nest of tentacles. The ancient female touched Jenna on the forehead, then repeated the gesture with Markser.

"Your sister?" Finder trilled.

Jenna looked down at the comatose woman. Markser's face was rigid, her arms and legs twitching as the seizures continued to wrack her nervous system. Jenna looked back at Finder, then touched her forehead. "Yes," she said. "My sister."

Finder fluttered her grasping arms, an acknowledgment. "Sister go home."

The enormous Theid triss released another command, greenish-gold in color, and without hesitation, the people below her started upward, bearing Markser toward the airlock. Finder waited until they were alone, then once again touched Jenna's forehead.

"My sister stay?" Finder kept her words simple, but the emotion was plain to Jenna even without an olfactor to interpret. "Go with the River now?"

For a fleeting moment Jenna almost said yes, the thought of traveling among the stars with the Theid triss enticing. She had been happy here once, content to share their long, endless dreams. But, she knew sadly, that time was gone. Her life, wrecked as it might be, lay elsewhere. Reverently, she swam closer to Finder and touched her tapered snout.

"I go home," she said.

Time seemed to fail. Jenna stopped breathing, afraid she might slip back into the Theid patterns that had once devoured her. Slowly, Finder drew a small device from under her torso and held it. Hesitantly, Jenna touched the strange object. Slick, gray ceramic swirled and curved it on itself, an endless twisted loop, as if a nautilus had been inverted then warped into something dangerous and alien. The device vibrated, the water around it warmed. Jenna stared into Finder's dark eyes.

"This is one of your engines," she said.

"You came for this, yes?"

"Yes," Jenna said softly. The massive Theid pressed the device into her hands.

"Sister, be well." Finder gave her a final caress with her grasping arms, then vanished into the swirling water. Jenna started upward. The Theid around the airlock drew back in a wide circle and let her pass. She paused beneath the airlock and took a last look around her, then darted through the

square hatch. Strong arms grabbed her and helped her to the deck. She fell to her knees and let the water gush from her airways. Yastrenko looked chagrined as he wrapped a blanket around her shoulders.

“Thank God, you’re back,” he said. “Are you all right?”

Jenna wiped her face with the blanket and looked around the little chamber. Markser lay on a stretcher, surrounded by medics, a ventilator down her throat. Already, the woman seemed calmer. The device Finder had given her still pulsed in her grip. It seemed heavier out of the water, more energetic, almost alive. Carefully, she passed the device to the technician. Yastrenko stepped closer, but she warned him off with a frown. She wasn’t ready to forgive him. Not yet. After everything that had happened, she wasn’t sure it even mattered anymore.

“Am I all right?” She struggled to her feet, then calmly said, “No. But I will be.”

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